

Lawmakers cry foul over endorsements

By Joseph Straw – 03/12/06

WASHINGTON - The state teachers union is sitting on the National Education Association's report card for Connecticut's congressional delegation, and the state's three Republicans say that's because they each got an "A."

The Connecticut Education Association, which is mulling endorsements for this year's pivotal midterm elections, is one of nine state chapters that has declined to post the delegation's grades on the NEA Web site.

The move comes as two state incumbents, Reps. Rob Simmons, R-2, and Christopher Shays, R-4, enter two of the tightest races in the country against return challengers Joe Courtney and Diane Farrell, respectively.

Last month Mike Castle, R-Del., a senior member of the House Education and Workforce Committee, and two colleagues wrote NEA President Reg Weaver seeking an explanation.

Weaver told the lawmakers that the NEA has placed disclosure at the discretion of state chapters, urging them and their colleagues to reach out to chapter presidents.

They did just that, to no avail, so last week Simmons, Shays and Rep. Nancy Johnson, R-5, cried foul and wrote a similar letter to CEA President Rosemary Coyle.

Johnson's office alleged censorship.

"Isn't it ironic that an education group is engaging in censorship?" said Johnson's spokesman Brian Schubert. "Nancy enjoys tremendous support among rank-and-file teachers in Connecticut, but unfortunately the political leadership of their group refuses to release these scores to the public."

Shays just wants the grades released to the public, said spokeswoman Sarah Moore. "The bottom line is we do not know why CEA would withhold information from their members and Connecticut residents who are concerned about the quality of education in our country which is why we wrote the letter asking them," Moore said.

Simmons spokesman John Goodwin said the letter "really speaks for itself."

"Rob Simmons is proud of his pro-education record and believes transparency makes for a healthy democracy. Citizens deserve to know the grades of Congressman Simmons and the entire Connecticut delegation as determined by one of the premier education advocacy

groups: the National Education Association," Goodwin said.

CEA Executive Director John Yrchik said his group is circulating candidate questionnaires as part of its traditional endorsement process, and has elected not to go public with NEA scores.

"Under the rules of the NEA (Political Action) Committee, a state can elect to publish the scores or not publish scores, and we chose not to publish scores until the process is complete. We've chosen not to publish the scores of any candidate," Yrchik said.

In his response to the Castle letter, Weaver, like Yrchik, noted that in the 109th Congress the NEA has implemented more complicated criteria for evaluating lawmakers, considering legislation, Cosponsorship, meetings and letter-writing efforts along with votes.

The new system "warranted some transition time for all of us in the NEA family," which was a reason for leaving disclosure decision up to states, Weaver said.